

Attorney: Pollution ball dropped

Documents show EPA dismissed results of 1985 tests

By Laurence Darmiento
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Water regulators believed they had found rocket-fuel contamination in underground water south of Azusa 12 years ago, but rejected those results, concluding the testing method was flawed, according to documents released Monday.

The contaminant perchlorate

— which has since shut down four Valley wells when discovered in a new round of refined testing this year — was detected in 1985 in tests ordered by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, according to test results obtained by an attorney handling a water pollution lawsuit.

However, a year later the EPA discounted the tests, per-

formed by an independent lab, after finding supposedly pure control samples also were testing positive for perchlorate. It found that nitrate pollution, common in the area, could cause false positive results for the rocket-fuel additive.

"Admittedly the test was crude, but they had reason to further investigate. The issue was that there was a notice of a

potential problem," said Pasadena attorney Mark Algorri, who represents the Committee Against Toxic Water Exposure in the San Gabriel Valley and is preparing a lawsuit.

"Somebody woke up out of their sleep, and all of a sudden we have something in 1997 that says there was perchlorate. The ball was dropped. There was no doubt about it," he said.

Perchlorate, which has been linked to thyroid disorders, is used as an accelerant in solid rocket fuel. It inhibits the absorption of iodine by the thyroid gland, which regulates growth and metabolism.

The EPA ordered the 1985 tests noting Aerojet had developed and tested rocket engines at its Azusa plant. The company

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has since been named among 19 companies potentially responsible for a 26-square-mile plume of water south of its plant polluted with industrial solvents and perchlorate.

EPA officials said Monday they were at a loss to comment on the documents since they were unable to immediately locate them. However, Keith Takata, chief of the EPA's Superfund program in California, said it has taken years to develop reliable methods of detecting perchlorate.

"What happened over time is

that we learned a lot more about the health effects of perchlorate, and that in turn drove people to find better analytic methods," he said. "It was only this year that the state Department of Health Services developed a reliable method."

The 1985 results showed that wells operated by eight water purveyors, including the Covina Irrigating Co., the cities of Azusa and Glendora and Miller Brewing Co. were contaminated by perchlorate at levels ranging from 110 parts per billion to 2,600 parts per billion.

In comparison, the four wells shut down this year after the latest testing conducted by state health officials had levels no higher than 159 parts per billion. Early this year the state set a provisional health standard of 18 parts per billion.

The closed wells were operated by the La Puente Valley County Water District and the San Gabriel Valley Water Co.

The EPA completely discounted the 1985 results by May 1986, according to a technical review provided Monday by the Main San Gabriel Basin Watermaster, which manages the 167-square-mile water basin.

"The analytic procedure used for perchlorate analysis was determined to be inappropriate," states the EPA report. "Therefore, the results of the perchlorate analyses were rejected in the quality assurance review of the laboratory results."

"There was a problem with the scientific method," said Carol Williams, executive officer of the Watermaster. "We don't know that there were in fact high levels of perchlorate at that time. Everything now points to nitrate."

Algorri's firm is already representing some 150 plaintiffs suing the Southern California Water Co. for pollution caused by industrial solvents.

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